

Writing Good Survey Questions
Tips & Advice
February 21, 2013

- Step 1: Establish goals
- Step 2: Develop questions and responses
- Step 3: Pilot test questions
- Step 4: Re-evaluate each question

General Tips

- A. Identify what you want to learn.
- B. Remove “wouldn’t it be nice to know” questions. Only include questions that directly shed light on what you want to learn.
- C. Know how you will use and present the information.
- D. Remove questions for which a respondent will not have immediate access to the information needed to answer the question (or tell the respondent beforehand what is needed).
- E. Remove questions that a respondent may not be willing to answer.

Wording Questions

- F. Use clear wording without abbreviations or jargon.
- G. One issue, skill, ability per question. Split “double-barreled” questions into two questions
 - **Problematic:** I am confident in my ability to write a cover letter and resume.
 - **Better:** I am confident in my ability to write a cover letter.
 - **Better:** I am confident in my ability to write a resume.
- H. Avoid double negatives
 - **Problematic:** I am not incompetent when I am part of a multi-disciplinary team.
a) Strongly Disagree b) Disagree) c) Neutral d) Agree e) Strong Agree
 - **Better:** I am competent when I am part of a multi-disciplinary team.
a) Strongly Disagree b) Disagree) c) Neutral d) Agree e) Strong Agree
- I. Avoid leading questions
 - **Problematic:** Would you be willing to attend a weekend job fair if it increases your chances of getting a job interview?
 - **Better:** Would you attend a weekend job fair if it were available?

 - **Problematic:** To what extent do you agree that opportunities for community service are important to you?
 - **Better:** To what extent do you agree or disagree that opportunities for community service are important to you?
- J. Make questions as specific and concrete as possible
 - **Problematic:** I am confident in my ability to communicate effectively.
 - **Better:** I am confident in my ability to present my research findings at a conference.

Wording Responses

- K. Response alternatives should be exhaustive and mutually exclusive
- **Problematic:** How many conferences did you attend this semester?
a) 1 b) 2 b) 3 c) 3 or more
 - **Better:** How many conferences did you attend this semester?
a) 0 b) 1 b) 2 c) 3 or more
- L. Use balanced scales (i.e., equal number of positive and negative response options)
- **Problematic:** How would you rate on-campus apartment housing?
a) Satisfactory
b) Good
c) Excellent
 - **Better:** How would you rate on-campus apartment housing?
a) Poor
b) Fair
c) Good
d) Excellent
- M. Be careful where you place “No Opinion” or “Unsure” usual they should be placed at the end of a scale
- **Problematic:** To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement: “Our campus is a safe place to work”?
a) Strongly Disagree
b) Disagree
c) Unsure/No Opinion
d) Agree
e) Strongly Agree
 - **Better:** To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement: “Our campus is a safe place to work”?
a) Strongly Disagree
b) Disagree
c) Agree
d) Strongly Agree
e) Unsure
 - **Better:** To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement: “Our campus is a safe place to work”?
a) Strongly Disagree
b) Disagree
c) Neither Agree or Disagree
d) Agree
e) Strongly Agree

Writing Good Survey Questions Useful Answer Categories

If you want to know how often something occurs, ask for the exact number of times or ask, “how often...” and choose from the following categories:

Never	Almost Never	Never
Rarely	Occasionally	Almost Never
Occasionally	Sometimes	Sometimes
Regularly	Often	Fairly Often
Don't Know	Don't Know	Very Often

Never	Hardly Ever	Not At All
Rarely	Rarely	Occasionally
Sometimes	Sometimes	Frequently
Most of the Time	Often	
Always	Very Often	

If you want to find out the degree of people’s feelings, their attitude, or belief, ask “to what extent...” and choose from the following categories:

Not Very Effective	Not Very Prepared	Very Dissatisfied
Somewhat Effective	Somewhat Prepared	Dissatisfied
Moderately Effective	Moderately Prepared	Neutral
Very Effective	Well Prepared	Satisfied
Not Sure	Uncertain	Very Satisfied

Strongly Disagree	Very Poor	Needs Work
Disagree	Poor	Good
Neither Agree or Disagree	Fair	Excellent
Agree	Good	
Strongly Agree	Very Good	

If you want to find out people’s intentions or aspirations ask, “do you expect to...” and ask them to choose from the following categories:

Definitely No	No Chance
No	Very Little Chance
Uncertain	Unsure
Yes	Some Chance
Definitely Yes	Very Good Chance

Sources:

Kiernan, Nancy Ellen (2004). *Useful Categories: Tipsheet #44*, University Park, PA: Penn State Cooperative Extension. Available at <http://extension.psu.edu/Evaluation/pdf/TS44.pdf>
 Henning, Gavin. *Ordered Response Options*. Dartmouth College. Available at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~oir/docs/Ordered_Response_Options.doc

8) How helpful was the Career Services Center in helping you find your job after your time at ACME University?

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Unsatisfied
- Very unsatisfied
- I never used Career Services Center
- N/A

9) Improving _____ would best improve my social life at ACME University

- Team sports
- School spirit
- School events
- Party scene and Greek life

10) What is your major? _____

11) During an average week in the quarter, what amount of time, in hours, do you spend surfing the net, emailing, texting, using Facebook, or on Twitter?